

Transforming Relationship series
Sermon #2 – Generosity
Sept. 24, 2006
Kory Wilcoxson

The Roman church was in a bit of an uproar. Although Paul had never visited there, he'd heard about it. The church itself was fairly unique in that it was made up of two groups: life-long Jews who held fast to their traditional ways of faith, and brand spanking new Christians walking in off the pagan streets and bringing their worldly ways with them. Well-groomed fans of Lawrence Welk were sitting next to punk rockers with body piercings, and each group was getting a little uppity about the other. Instead of holding hands they were pointing fingers, telling each other they brought the wrong things at the potlucks or worshipped on the wrong day or sat in someone else's pew.

So Paul writes in a letter to the Romans that they need to knock it off. He tells them that they are on the same team and have the same Head Coach, so they should be more focused on what brings them together than what separates them. "Let's stop passing judgment on one another," Paul says.

Paul should know about this. At one point in his life he wasn't Paul, he was Saul, a zealous Jew and student of the law who took it upon himself to persecute all those who didn't believe as he believed. When Jesus met him on the road to Damascus and struck him blind, it was the very Christians he was persecuting who nursed him back to health and set him on his missionary path. Paul knows what it means to accept each other.

Today, we continue our sermon series on Transforming Relationships. Last week we talked about the importance of paying attention to one another, and how giving the gift of our full presence can greatly enhance a relationship. The characteristic we'll be examining today that I believe can transform our relationships is generosity.

Now, let me clarify: this doesn't mean financial generosity, although that can be a component of a healthy relationship. There's a saying that goes, "If you give a friend \$20 and you never see that friend again, it was probably money well spent." You may choose to be financially generous in your relationships, but I'll leave that up to you.

The generosity I'm talking about is not a generosity of wallet, but a generosity of spirit. Simply put, it means assuming the best about a person, even when they are at their worst. It means seeing them for who God created them to be, not for who they particularly are at any given moment. A generous spirit is one that believes the best about another person, sometimes despite the evidence at hand.

This may sound easy to do, but to be honest we have a lot working against us that keeps us from being generous. Pride is one of them. Pride can be a nasty thing. All of us like to feel good about ourselves, and the reality of our human condition is we often do so at the expense of others. Annie Lamott writes that you can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.

Author Matthew Woodley warns against what he calls the "idiot default." The idiot default is proof that we often automatically assume the worst about a person. When we identify an apparent imperfection, or a certain incompetence, or a moral failure, our default kicks in and we think to ourselves, "I know there are a number of different explanations for what I just saw or heard, and I'm sure all of them are perfectly plausible, but I'll start with, 'That person must be an idiot!'"

It's so easy for our idiot default to take over. I'll be walking around Target with our girls and I'll hear a toddler three aisles over throwing a fit over a toy and I'll think, "Why can't that parent control their child like I'm controlling my perfect little angels?" Or I'll see a driver make a bad lane change and I'll think, "Why can't that person use the turn signals that God gave them?" And in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "What an idiot!" conveniently forgetting the many times that I've been the idiot that others were looking down upon. The idiot default at work.

Being generous in spirit simply means assuming the best instead of the worst, and no one can teach us more about seeing the best in people than Jesus. Take this example in the second chapter of Mark. Jesus is sitting in a crowded house teaching. Midway through the sermon he feels a bit of dust land on his shoulder, then a little more, then a few clods of dirt hit him in the head. He looks up and sees four men clawing a hole in the roof. When the hole is big enough, they lower their paralyzed friend down to the floor, right in front of Jesus.

Now, if that were my house, there would be a lot of thoughts going through my head, and none of them would have anything to do with assuming the best about these people. Who's going to fix my roof? What if it rains? I wanted a skylight in the other room, not this one! Who's going to clean up this mess? You guys are idiots!

But Jesus has a different reaction. Instead of assuming the worst, he sees the best. He looks at the four friends, and Mark tells us when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven." Because of their spirit and love of their friend, and despite their poor house remodeling skills, Jesus sees the best in them.

A stingy spirit separates us from others, while a generous spirit opens us up to the hopes and dreams and fears and struggles of other people. A generous spirit is also open to alternative ways of seeing and living life, even if those ways don't correspond to our own. A generous spirit has room for grace in it.

I experienced this first-hand in a very powerful way. I didn't always know I was going to be a minister. In fact, up until about three weeks before entering seminary, I had no idea. But through a series of events God spoke to me, and I heard this calling into ministry. It was a scary and exciting time, and I found myself turning to others to get their opinion of this new career path.

I was most nervous about telling my friend Kevin. Kevin and I were best buddies; in fact, he had been best man at my wedding. He was what he called a "former Christian." He used to attend church, but had a couple very negative experiences with the folks there, and angrily vowed never to set foot in a church again. I wasn't sure how he was going to react when I told him I was crossing the lines to become one with the enemy, but I knew his opinion was important to me.

So one day, I worked up the courage and said, "Kevin, you may not believe this, but I'm thinking about going into ministry." Now I was prepared for all kinds of reactions: You're doing what? Are you serious? Why would you want to do that? Are you an idiot? But Kevin didn't say any of those things. He simply smiled and said, "Dude, that's a natural for you!"

What made that moment so special for me was realizing that Kevin had no expectations for me other than letting me become the person God wants me to be. This is what Jesus did so well. He looked at Mary Magdalene and saw a woman capable of profound love. He looked at a simple fisherman like Peter and saw a leader with

tremendous potential. When he looked at people, he didn't seem them for what he wanted them to be – he saw them for who they were, for who God created them to be.

This is such a hard thing to do. The area in which I struggle with this the most is with my children. Maybe this will get easier as they get older and settle into their own lives, but I'm not so sure. For now, I have to constantly hold my opinion in check and let them be who they are.

Leigh and I both ran into this recently with our older daughter Sydney. It was time for Syd to learn how to ride a two-wheeler, but she had been putting it off because she was afraid of falling off. I thought to myself, "I wish she were more willing to take risks." I'm sure I'll regret saying that some day! When she finally was ready to try, she didn't want either of us to help her; she is a bit stubborn, like one of her parents, and wanted to learn on her own. And she did in a very short amount of time.

I look at my children and I see a gap between who I want them to be and who they are becoming. It's not a wide gap, but it's still there. Where do we find the skill needed to step back and let our children, our friends, our family be who they are and not who we want them to be?

For me, it boils down to grace, the grace of God. I am accepted by God for who I am, and that acceptance is unconditional. God doesn't say I have to pray a certain amount of times or give a certain amount of money. That doesn't mean God doesn't want me to do those things, nor does it mean that God approves when I do just the opposite. But none of that is a requirement for acceptance. God shows us grace, and then we in turn extend that grace to others.

Accepting doesn't mean approving of a person's choices. It also doesn't mean we can't help a person get on the right track if they've gone astray. There's a world of difference between making judgments and being judgmental. Acceptance simply means, in the midst of their flaws, their sins, their anger, their lust, their selfishness, their cowardice, we accept them. Just like God, in the midst of all of our flaws and sins, accepts us.

We have within us the ability to offer acceptance, love, and hope; we also have the ability to criticize, to judge, and to condemn. Stop and think: which of those would you like to receive? Which of those brings God the most glory?